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Enabling Environment Snapshot

Trinidad and Tobago

April 2025

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Context

In 2024, Trinidad and Tobago faced compounding crises in security and the economy. A record 623 homicides led the government to declare a nationwide state of emergency on 30 December 2024, which ended on 13 April 2025. Unlike the 2010 state of emergency, which included a national curfew, no curfew was imposed in 2024. However, the police and military received expanded powers to detain individuals and conduct warrantless searches. Civil society groups warned of potential racial profiling and harm to low-income communities.

At the same time, rising inflation and cost-of-living pressures triggered unrest. In late 2024, protests broke out over unpaid wages, water shortages, and service failures. Trade unions and community groups led these demonstrations, reinforcing civil society's frontline role in voicing public frustrations.

Despite tensions, meaningful collaborations also occurred. In November 2024, parliamentarians and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) convened to explore environmental rights through the Escazú Agreement. In March 2025, the government partnered with civil society organisations (CSOs) and international agencies to launch a Women, Peace and Security National Action Plan.

1. Respect for and protection of fundamental freedoms

Trinidad and Tobago generally respects constitutional freedoms of expression, association, and peaceful assembly, and is rated "open" on the CIVICUS Monitor. NGOs, unions, and advocacy groups operate without formal restrictions. In the past year, numerous peaceful protests on wages, public services, and governance were permitted without crackdown. Even during the 2024 state of emergency, gatherings were allowed without curfews.

Examples include pilots protesting in October 2024 and utility workers assembling outside a minister's home, to which he responded with "no objection." Legal exceptions exist, such as strikes by essential workers (e.g. police) being restricted, under Section 36, sub-section 5 of the Industrial Relations Act, Chapter 88:01. The exemptions are meant to ensure continuity in essential services, which is fair in principle. But in practice, they can limit workers' ability to negotiate when there are no strong alternatives for dialogue, so it is important that they are used carefully and not too broadly.

The media landscape is pluralistic, and press freedom is broadly upheld. In October 2023, the UK Privy Council ruled that the Sedition Act cannot be used without intent to incite violence, marking a major win for freedom of expression. As the final court of appeal for Trinidad and Tobago, the Privy Council plays a critical role in upholding legal rights. However, this role remains contested. There is growing advocacy for the Caribbean Court of Justice (CCJ) to replace the Privy Council as the nation's highest appellate court, seen by many as a necessary step toward full judicial sovereignty and the removal of colonial vestiges. Former Attorney General Ramesh Maharaj noted that the court ruling limits government abuse of the law. There are two notable cases of this. A journalist was awarded damages in 2023 for wrongful arrest while reporting, and in 2024, a video blogger was similarly detained and charged under sedition laws.

In December 2024, the Finance Minister accused media outlets of distorting Cabinet leaks, though he later moderated his claims. While the Minister's comments did not lead to formal action, they reflect a level of political discomfort with critical reporting. Such statements can have a negative effect on press freedom if they discourage journalists from covering sensitive issues.

Legal reforms are ongoing. The long-dormant Data Protection Act saw proposed amendments in 2023, following civil society concerns over its potential impact on journalism. The Ministry of Public Administration initiated a policy review to explore exemptions for certain categories of expression, including investigative journalism, aiming to balance privacy protection with journalistic freedom.

However, in March 2025, Trinidad and Tobago's Court of Appeal reinstated colonial-era laws criminalising same-sex relations, drawing strong criticism from human rights groups and raising concerns about regression in civil liberties. While legal reforms like the Data Protection Act signal incremental progress, this development highlights the uneven and fragile nature of rights protections.

2. Supportive legal framework for the work of civil society actors

While Trinidad and Tobago has historically maintained a broadly supportive legal environment for civil society, legislation such as the Non-Profit Organisations Act (2019) has introduced higher levels of complexity into the system. NGOs typically register under the Companies Act of 1995, or as Non-Profit Organisations (NPOs) under the Non-Profit Organisations Act of 2019. The NPO Act, which aims to strengthen financial transparency and prevent misuse of funds, mandates annual reporting and registration with the Registrar General. The Registrar General can refuse or cancel registration, but only for specific compliance breaches (e.g. failure to file returns). The NPO Act does not allow deregistration based on national interest or political grounds.

While these requirements promote accountability, some smaller NGOs struggle with the administrative burden. In 2024, the government withheld its annual subvention from the Trinidad and Tobago Red Cross due to non-compliance with financial guidelines and governance concerns - highlighting the state's growing enforcement of standards. The requirements are not intentionally used to limit NGO operations, but the lack of clarity and coordination around regulations creates grey areas that make compliance difficult. This can lead to excessive penalties and ultimately hinders NGOs' ability to operate effectively.

Civil society organisations operate freely, without new legal restrictions on advocacy, formation, or foreign funding. Freedom of association remains constitutionally protected, and Freedom House affirms the sector's robust presence. Trinidad and Tobago has endorsed regional frameworks for civic participation, such as the Inter-American Charter and the Escazú Agreement (not yet ratified).

However, compliance demands have risen due to global anti-money laundering norms. NGOs are expected to maintain clear financial records and may face audits. These measures, while well-intentioned, may burden smaller CSOs lacking technical capacity.

3. Accessible and sustainable resources

Trinidad and Tobago's civil society relies on a mix of limited state funding, corporate donations, international grants, and community fundraising. Government subventions exist but are modest and come with specific conditions, such as demonstrating the ability to meet at least 40% of the operating budget, providing audited financial statements, and maintaining dedicated bank accounts. These requirements, while aimed at ensuring accountability, can pose challenges for smaller NGOs, potentially affecting their operational freedom.

Most NGOs operate on tight budgets. One domestic violence shelter reported monthly costs ten times higher than their state support, relying heavily on private donors. Corporate philanthropy helps but is limited; in March 2023, ANSA McAL Foundation contributed TT$175,000 (ca. 22,500 Euro) to four NGOs, including a disability group and a women's shelter.

International grants continue to play a limited but key role. Programmes like the EU-UN Spotlight Initiative fund work on gender-based violence, while environmental CSOs benefit from the Global Environment Facility Small Grants Programme. However, these funds are often project-based and administratively demanding, making them difficult for smaller CSOs to access.

Although the full impact of the USAID and related funding freeze on the Caribbean is still unfolding, initial observations suggest that civil society in Trinidad and Tobago may be less affected than in other territories. This is largely anecdotal at present, but US support to the local civil society sector has historically been more limited compared to other parts of the region, resulting in a less pronounced effect.

A major challenge is banking "de-risking." Responding to global anti-money laundering pressures, banks have tightened controls on nonprofit accounts. Nearly 40% of correspondent banks exited the region over the last decade, increasing costs and complicating access to international transfers. While no major NGO reported closures in 2024, many faced delays and heightened due diligence.

The EU-funded project IGNITE CSOs is a collective civil society action that is currently working with the State and the banking sector to support the mitigation of issues like bank de-risking and other unintended consequences of the State's FATF requirements.

Rising inflation and limited fiscal space have further strained funding. However, new opportunities are emerging. The Women, Peace and Security National Action Plan opens funding avenues for women-led initiatives, and diaspora crowdfunding is gaining traction.

4. State openness and responsiveness

Trinidad and Tobago's government's engagement with civil society was mixed over the past year. Notable collaboration occurred during the creation of the Women, Peace and Security National Action Plan, which included extensive consultation with CSOs and international partners.

Similarly, a Parliamentary Caucus on the Escazú Agreement brought together lawmakers, NGOs like the Caribbean Natural Resources Institute, and UN agencies to discuss environmental rights. While the agreement has not yet been ratified, its discussion marked a step toward inclusive environmental governance. These were examples where civil society participation and consultation were fully integrated into the process, and in some cases playing a lead role.

In the refugee sector, advocacy from local NGOs and international organisations led to a policy shift in 2024, allowing Venezuelan children to attend public schools for the first time, following years of behind-the-scenes lobbying.

Formal public consultations exist, such as those by Joint Select Committees, but are inconsistently applied.

However, friction between civil society and government remains. Labour unions criticised the government for failing to appoint negotiation boards or meet on wage demands. Anticorruption groups and media also decried the absence of institutional mechanisms for public oversight.

Despite past dialogue during the COVID pandemic, calls for national consultations on inflation and cost-of-living were unheeded in 2024. However, the government-driven Constitutional Reform process did generate thousands of public submissions, many advocating for stronger rights to consultation and participation. While the exercise went beyond mere "tick-boxing," its effectiveness was undermined by perceptions of partisanship—being launched by the Prime Minister under the banner of his political party, leading to public distrust across large segments of society. There was no clear timeline or mechanism for follow-up, and civil society actors have since called for a broader, more inclusive, and CSO-led process that avoids politicisation and fosters genuine, cross-sectoral dialogue.

5. Political Culture and Public Discourses on Civil Society

Trinidad and Tobago generally maintains a respectful public discourse toward civil society. NGOs are not vilified by the media or state, and civil society leaders often appear on talk shows or in news articles as expert voices on national issues such as crime and poverty. Government rhetoric tends to be positive, with officials frequently acknowledging partnerships with NGOs on initiatives like disaster relief and vaccination drives. There is no prevailing "foreign agent" stigma for civil society actors.

However, the tone of media coverage varies by topic. A 2022–2024 analysis of local media revealed that while reporting on LGBTQI+ issues was largely free of slurs, it often lacked inclusivity. Outlets tended to quote religious leaders without providing counterpoints from LGBTQI+ activists. Public commentary—especially in letters to the editor and social media comments—remained overwhelmingly negative, reflecting conservative societal norms. Few media stories featured the personal experiences or demands of LGBTQI+ individuals, though exceptions included Newsday's "Glad to be Gay" and "Grindr Danger" features.

Women's rights campaigns and anti-violence vigils generally receive empathetic coverage, especially amid high rates of gender-based violence. For instance, a 2024 vigil for domestic violence victims was prominently and sympathetically covered.

Attitudes toward migrants, particularly Venezuelans, are mixed. While civil society groups like Living Water Community advocate for inclusion, Freedom House notes that some officials and citizens have made derogatory remarks. In September 2024, remarks by the Police Commissioner linking illegal migrants to crime drew criticism from rights groups, with media editorials warning such claims were inflammatory and unsupported by evidence.

Volunteerism remains strong, often channelled through religious or service groups. Social media allows civil society to speak directly to the public, and during recent protests, many users expressed solidarity with demonstrators.

6. Access to a secure digital environment

Trinidad and Tobago's digital space is largely open. Internet access is widespread, and there have been no reported shutdowns or content blocks. Civil society organisations, journalists, and activists freely use social media and digital platforms without censorship or criminalisation.

The Social Media Monitoring Unit of the Trinidad and Tobago Police continues to track public online content for criminal activity, including human trafficking and terrorism. Although its role

is officially limited to open-source monitoring, privacy advocates remain watchful to ensure it is not used for political surveillance. As of 2025, no abuses have been reported.

Cybersecurity remains a concern. In 2023–2024, several ransomware attacks targeted public institutions - including one that shut down the postal service. These incidents exposed weaknesses in national infrastructure. At the same time, efforts to fully implement the Data Protection Act (passed in 2011) are ongoing. Amendments tabled in 2023 addressed media concerns, but the Office of the Information Commissioner remains unstaffed, leaving privacy enforcement in limbo.

While no civil society groups reported targeted cyberattacks in the past year, the threat of phishing, trolling, and misinformation—particularly ahead of elections—persists. Groups like the Media Institute of the Caribbean are offering digital safety training to NGOs and journalists.

Challenges and Opportunities

As Trinidad and Tobago emerges from its 2024–2025 state of emergency, rising crime remains a concern. Civil society fears a relapse into violence and is advocating for long-term prevention strategies like youth programmes and judicial reform.

Several legal reforms, including the Data Protection Act and Cybercrime Bill, are in progress but risk stalling. Continued CSO advocacy is crucial to ensure passage and implementation.

Public attitudes toward LGBTQI+ people and migrants remain divided. Upcoming events like Pride Month and World Refugee Day offer a chance to shift narratives, celebrate inclusion, and advocate for vulnerable groups.

In this critical period, civil society has an opportunity to influence national direction, through advocacy, partnerships, and public dialogue toward a more rights-respecting and participatory democracy.

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